

CENTRAL MARKET

Cheap and chic, head to Budapest before everyone else does, says **Adriaanne Pielou**



Tucked away in Central Europe, hemmed in by Slovakia, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria and Ukraine, Hungary has had an often tragic history, continually invaded – most recently by the Nazis and the Soviet Union. But in Budapest – that's Buda and Pest, divided by the Danube – it's been left with one of the most beautiful capitals in the world. That is due largely to Hungary's golden age, from 1867 until the First World War, when it allied with Austria to create the Austro-Hungarian Empire, that byword for extravagance, grandeur and a sparkling cultural life. The era left Budapest endowed with street after street of graceful, imposing fin-de-siècle and art nouveau buildings that largely escaped not only the bombardments of World War II – which ruined so many other lovely European cities – but the depredations of life from 1945 until 1989 as an unwilling satellite of the Soviet Union. Today, if you're looking for a weekend destination that mixes serendipitous shopping in cobbled streets with frequent opportunities to stop for coffee and cake, excellent museum exhibitions, nights at the opera or a concert, and the chance to loll in a 17th century Ottoman-era hammam or grand 19th century thermal baths, Budapest hits all the marks.

Prices are mostly considerably lower than in western European capitals, starting with the coffee or ice cream that will cost you only about 350 forints (Dh5). And an extra reason to go now? A W Hotel opens in a year or two. Soon everyone ?ACE 7?will be going.

Hilly Buda, mostly residential, is of interest to visitors primarily for its famous



Gellert Spa hotel, opened in 1918, which uses the warm water of one of the 100-odd thermal springs that bubble up under the city, and the hilltop medieval castle complex, home to the National Gallery and Museum of the History of Budapest. Browsing there should be followed by R&R in alluring old cafes such as the famous Daubner, opened in 1901, and Ruszwurm, both musts for any chocolate and cake connoisseur. But most visitors spend most of their time across the river, in flat central Pest, where elegant streets reminiscent of

Paris or Vienna are packed with interest, from the lusciously gilded state opera house to the magnificently domed and crenellated Parliament building and the chilly House of Terror, in the former Nazi and then Hungarian secret police HQ. That will be of special interest if you've also stopped off at the brilliant Bestseller bookshop, where alongside the witty, illuminating *Budapest, A Critical Guide* by Andras Torok are eye-openers such as *Hungary: Post-Communist Mafia State* by ex-government minister Balint Magyar.

Lighter diversions, 10 minutes from the centre on the enchanting old Line 1 of the Metro, include the zoo, with an art nouveau elephant house modelled on a central Asian mosque, and the open-air Szechenyi baths, built in 1913, the largest medicinal baths in Europe, where elderly bare-chested men playing chess on floating boards gruffly provide the setting for a selfie. And between the two riverbanks is Margaret Island, with the Danubius a spa hotel, an open-air theatre, and open-air pools to discover among the trees.



DESIGNER SHOPPING

Once the Iron Curtain had been pulled away, Budapest went mad for malls, but that it was recently big news when H&M opened at the smartest, Mom Park, in Buda, tells you all you need to know. Don't bother. The main street for luxury clothing and accessories is Andrassy, where you find Burberry, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Emporio Armani, Guess, Michael Kors and more line a Champs Elysees-like broad, leafy 19th boulevard running from Oktogon to Deak Square with the glorious opera house

as its centrepiece. Among the street's smaller stores is Michak Negrin at No 6 (michalnegrin.hu), selling deliciously pretty handmade Swarovski glass bead earrings and necklaces from around €75 (Dh324) to €170 (Dh735). VAT is a hideous 27 per cent but reclaimable on receipts over €175 (Dh755).

SKINCARE

Bubbling up from the earth's crust under Hungary are 1,700 thermal springs, more than anywhere else in Europe; Budapest alone has over 100. The



healing properties of these mineral-rich waters explains why Hungarian women have historically been famous for their skin. Best of the natural, no-synthetics skincare based on these mineral-rich healing waters are the Omorovicza, Eminence, and Ilde Pekar ranges. Omorovicza's elegant shop anchors one end of Andrassy Avenue. Its wash-off cleanser made with Moor mud costs 19,500 forints (Dh278) for 150ml and the delectable neroli and rose-scented Queen of Hungary Mist 10,000 forints (Dh143) for 50ml (omorovicza.com).

Clockwise from main, Budapest at night Getty Images; **the Gucci store on Andrassy Avenue** Alamy Stock Photo; **the House of Terror Museum** Alamy Stock Photo; **Gellert Baths** Alamy Stock Photo

This page, from right: shoppers in the Great Market Hall, Budapest Alamy Stock Photo; bottom centre: a tram in Buda Alamy Stock Photo; bottom left: a painted porcelain plate by Herend Getty Images

► Zador soaps are another top-quality Hungarian bathroom favourite, hand-made using the famous Heviz thermal water, scented with cherry blossom, fig and pear or paprika, beautifully packaged, and sold across the city at 2,750 forints (Dh39); (zador.com).

SUITS AND BOOTS MADE TO MEASURE

Ask a concierge where you can find bathing trunks for the thermal spa and they will probably direct you to the chic menswear store run by expat British tailor Simon Skottowe (simonskottowe.com). Besides Bond-in-the-60s type trunks he also sells shirts, ties and leather items, suits at €2,200 (Dh9,506), and if you have time for the three or four fittings he stipulates (especially for the bodyguards whose suits have to unobtrusively accommodate a gun under one armpit) have you can commission a bespoke suit in Italian or Scottish wool from about €3,500 (Dh15,125). For handmade men's shoes and boots, there's Gabor Csizmak, a tiny little shop operating for the last 34 years in the courtyard of one of the old apartment blocks near the Corinthia Hotel, with a hunched cobbler cutting and stitching away in the backroom and his wife, Gabriella, at the till. Leather-soled calf and python cowboy boots that in Nashville would cost you at least Dh1,200 here cost 51,500 forints (Dh734; gaborcsizmak.hu).

PORCELAIN AND ANTIQUES AND GOOSE-DOWN DUVETS

Herend, the famous Hungarian – and world's largest – porcelain manufacturer, founded in 1826, has a smart store among the designer shops on Andrássy Ave (herend.com). You can also often find vintage Herend pieces among the antique and curio shops centred on Falk Miksa Street, behind the Parliament building. If you've really got the antiques bug, it is well worth getting yourself out to the huge open-air flea market that operates daily in suburban Eczeri for communist-era posters, 19th-century coffee grinders and the like. And in a country where goose is on most menus and a goose-down duvet



essential for keeping the dank cold of winter at bay, the bedding specialist Billerbeck is worth a visit, with "six points out of five" super-warm duvets at 112,500 forints (Dh1,605) and lovely wool blankets (billerbeck.hu).

PAPRIKA AND CHOCOLATE

Paprika, made from red peppers, is a staple of Hungary's rich, spicy cooking and a trip to the largest covered market in Europe, Great Market Hall, in Pest, is well worthwhile even if you don't want to stock up with that – or the honeys and jams that besides delicious fruit,

vegetables and local cheeses also predominate. Hungarian chocolate is also excellent, on sale along with the cakes and coffee at the grand 19th-century cafés. Gerbeaud, the most famous, on Vorosmarty Square, gets crowded with other tourists (always getting in the way, we find) so is best very early or late. Near the Parliament building, Szalai Confectionary, which opened in 1917, is now run by the founders' grandson and great-great grandsons. Nandori dates back only to the 1950s, but has been a winner of the annual Cake of Hungary competition celebrating the country's founder, St Stephen, so deserves attention.

If you're in the city for several days it's worth going out to the Chocolate Museum (czokolade-muzeum.hu). It's in the suburbs but you can get there by Metro and bus in about 45 minutes. The generous samples offered throughout the tour, the tea-room in which you can enjoy cake or the tart you filled with chocolate (and then heaped with toppings) en route, and chocolate-heavy shop provide a pleasant if fattening way to spend a few hours on a chilly autumn afternoon.

Otherwise, the little Chocolate Museum above the branch of the Szamos chocolatier and cafe chain, founded in 1935, opposite the Parliament building, costs 500 forints (Dh7) to tour (szamosmarcipan.hu). But the flagship, Szamos Gourmet House, in the former Stock Exchange palace, is a more lavish setting in which to shop for choc.



GETTING AROUND

You never need hail a taxi. Trams and buses trundle across the city, never keeping you waiting more than a few minutes, and the Metro is a revelation with the architectural mix of its stations ranging from the cosy to the magnificent. Single tickets cost 350 forints (Dh5) but a Budapest Card gives you unlimited travel on all public transport (river boats included) for 4,150 forints (Dh59) for 72 hours (bkk.hu). River tours on the 10-person Venetian-style mahogany water limo are huge fun at 60,000 forints (Dh855) for 50 minutes, accompanied by subdued classical music or an exhilarating blast of AC/DC (dunarama.hu). Airport/hotel transfers on a 10-seater MiniBUD minivan cost just 1,900 forints (Dh27) each way (minibud.hu).

WHERE TO EAT

For afternoon tea, where but the sumptuously gilded New York Café, which opened on Erzsébet Street in 1894 and calls itself the most beautiful café in the world. It's hard to disagree, given the confection of chandeliers and red velvet. Live gypsy music accompanies tea, with the full works for two for €60 (Dh260); (newyorkcafe.hu). For a light supper before or after the opera – tapas of goat cheese, tapenade, and goose liver pate, say, at 4,250 forints (Dh61) – there's the old-world Callas, next door (callashouse.hu). For dinner on a chilly evening, Babel (babel-budapest.hu) uses 75 per cent Hungarian produce and a four-course tasting menu for 21,500 forints (Dh306); the austere decorated Tigris (tigrisrestaurant.hu) is good for rich traditional Hungarian dishes of goose or boar; and cosy Aszu (aszurestaurant.com) and cool Costes (costs.hu) are also recommended. And there's nowhere nicer for a long, lazy breakfast or brunch in the sunshine than the Four Seasons' terrace Kollazs Brasserie, with a view of the magnificent St Stephens' Basilica in one direction and of the river, Chain Bridge and castle in the other.



WHERE TO STAY

Corinthia Budapest

One of the grandest hotels in Europe when it opened in 1896 as the Grand Hotel Royal, this palatial hotel is located midway along the horse-shoe-shaped boulevard half-encircling the centre of Pest, Erzsébet Street. After a colourful history which included its spectacular ballroom being used as one of the first cinemas in Europe, its restoration before its reopening in 2003 saw the Maltese owners of the Corinthia chain keep the exterior façade and ballroom and magnificent staircase and redo the rest, which include light-filled five-storey atriums, rather dated but solidly comfortable rooms with perfect beds, blackout and sound-proofing along with good wifi, and 26 apartments opening onto a garden. Breakfast is a big treat here, with tables lavishly set out with cheeses, cold meats and fish, and a pastries area

Above: service at the New York Cafe in Erzsébet Korut, Budapest Alamy Stock Photo left: the Hotel Gresham Palace, Budapest Four Seasons Gresham Palace

deserving of special attention. And when you fall off the four or six trams which stop a minute away, exhausted by sight-seeing, you can sink into the Mezzanine lounge, which lays on all-day free drinks, cakes and snacks, before heading down for a massage in the beautifully restored old spa, built in 1886 and now run by Espa.Doubles from Dh1,050 per night including taxes; corinthia.com.

Four Seasons Gresham Palace

Opposite Chain bridge on Pest, the most beautiful art nouveau building in the city, Gresham Palace, derelict by the 1990s and exquisitely restored, is now the 179-room, 19-suite and altogether deeply fabulous Four Seasons, unarguably the most prestigious as well as nicest place to stay in Budapest. Service is impeccable; you feel everyone is thrilled to work here and delighted by the guests' delight. Mosaic floors, acres of velvet curtains, high-ceilinged rooms, super-comfortable beds, a rooftop spa, and the Kollazs brasserie (usually, as good at dinner as at breakfast) all add to the aesthetic joys of its interiors and guest-centric touches such as a single-lever shower and differently shaped bottles for the Omorovicza shampoo and conditioner that spare you the usual squinting-in-the-shower hotel-bathroom scenario. Pure pleasure. Plus, it seems to be one of the cheapest Four Seasons in the world. Doubles from \$549 (Dh2,017) per night including taxes; fourseasons.com.

GETTING THERE

Emirates flies to Budapest from Dh2,800 return. Wizzair flies from Dh1,028 return. Both fly direct from Dubai. ■